

Bangladesh: The counter-reformation

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Sunday, February 11: Joint forces arrest S.M. Nuruzzaman, ex-commissioner of the Phulbari town municipality and a leader of the Phulbari chapter of the national committee resisting the Phulbari coal mining project. Nuruzzaman was instrumental in organising the anti-mining protests at Phulbari last year that led to BDR firing that killed six people.

He was arrested by joint forces personnel and severely beaten up in the Phulbari market-place (in full public view) and then thrown in jail, with instructions to the local constabulary to hold him on whatever charges they could think of. It was only following protests and reporting of the incident in the media that he was released the next day.

So how should we understand this shocking incident? Yet another example of the caretaker government over-stepping its brief and taking action that is both high-handed and unconscionable? This is exactly the problem with the current situation of unaccountability, right?

Not so fast. This kind of action is indeed a problem, but not for the reason that most think it is. It is not simply a case of the caretaker government acting in an authoritarian and unaccountable manner. The danger, I am afraid, is far more fundamental than that.

Consider this: almost two weeks after the incident, there is still no information as to who gave the order to arrest Nuruzzaman and what the intention behind the action was. Right now the chain of command is so muddy that it is impossible to get to the bottom of the question of on what authority and with what objective actions are being taken.

The danger is not so much that the caretaker government is abusing its authority in an unaccountable and non-transparent manner. The

danger is that there remain those within both the army and the administration who are sympathetic to the outgoing BNP administration and who are using the confusion to try to bring about the downfall of the present government.

The current set-up is such that those within the government who wish for it to fail and be discredited are able to take actions and give orders that are actually harming the credibility of the government. Unchecked, they will only get bolder and more audacious.

This is how best to understand the bostee evictions and the anti-hawker drives. It is not a question of the caretaker government as a unified body being authoritarian and contemptuous of the public. Indeed, to this day, the caretaker government still cannot state with certainty on whose authority these policies were implemented, let alone on what grounds.

What is happening is that BNP loyalists are using the current confusion and the fact that there is no centralised authority and universally acknowledged chain of command to take actions that they know will bring the current government into disrepute.

The idea is to create pockets of resistance against the current administration so that when the time comes to put 50,000 people out on the streets to protest power shortages (or whatever) it will have a ready supply of men and women with a bona fide grievance against the current government.

It is heart-breaking that many of the bostee dwellers who had known nothing except extortion and marginalisation and repression these many years and had cheered the coming of the new order on January 11 found themselves its first victims. Their euphoria has, of course, turned to disillusionment and anger. That's the idea.

Nowhere is the spectre of the BNP machinations more apparent than in the attorney general's office and the judiciary. The egregious handling of the corruption cases is not merely the work of an over-matched and over-extended prosecutorial team, but reflects the concerted efforts of BNP loyalists still in the attorney general's office

to cast a pall of doubt over the entire process.

The loyalists know that they have a sympathetic judiciary that is ever happy to step in and hand down judgments that defy both rationality and established precedent and procedure, and that if there are any holes in the prosecution that these will be seized upon gratefully by both defence and arbiter.

In other words, the counter-reformation is very much alive and well. It would be a mistake to think that these people are going to lie down and play dead. They will not give up without a fight.

And as long as their bank accounts remain untouched and Tareq Rahman remains at large and the judiciary and attorney general's office remain in their hands and their people in every corner of the administration and army continue to sabotage the caretaker government, they will believe that they are still in with a fighting chance. And they would be right. Don't count them out just yet.

The stakes for the caretaker are unimaginable, the cost of failure unthinkable. If we are really to put in place the reforms necessary to make our democracy functional and really do something about the culture of corruption and criminality, and, most importantly, impunity that has flourished in the period of the Fourth Republic, then we have to be aware of this ferocious rearguard action that is being waged by the forces of the counter-reformation.

This is the answer to the question as to why so many of the most corrupt and criminal remain at large and outside the dragnet. It is important for the country to understand that there are split loyalties in the current administration and there remain four-party sympathisers at its core who are pulling out all the stops to protect their allies, and that their machinations need to be recognised for what they are and neutralised without delay if the country is to not descend into chaos.

It would thus be a mistake to think that these machinations are signs that the caretaker administration is even worse than what came before it or take these actions as evidence that

we need to return to where we were on January 10.
In fact, the opposite is true.

These actions are best understood as the desperate struggle of the ancien regime to try and sow the seeds of confusion to discredit the current administration and return itself to power by any means necessary. The danger is very real, and it is crucial that we all understand what is at stake.

P.S.

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* Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.